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Leslie Arends and the CIA

CONGRESSMAN LESLIE ARENDS of Illinois took to the House floor the other day with a thorough-going defense of the Central Intelligence Agency.

He said he did this because the CIA, our super hush-hush undercover outfit, had been falsely accused—and he cited some examples.

So far as we know, Arends' version of the "facts" were correct. He also said the CIA is the "finest intelligence agency in the World today," which also may be correct; we have no way of knowing.

The assurance from Arends is comforting, because he is the No. 2 Republican leader of the House, and can be quite partisan when he chooses. He is the top Republican on the House Armed Services Committee, and in this capacity, he said, he has been privy to much of the "inside" of CIA operations, and what he knows gives him full confidence in the agency.

But Arends went on to argue against a joint congressional committee to oversee the CIA, a step advocated by the Hoover Commission of 1955, by numerous members of Congress—and by ordinary common sense. He said the House Armed Services Committee has a subcommittee, of which he is a member, which adequately polices the CIA. CIA also theoretically is watched by other Senate and House subcommittees.

If a joint committee were "superimposed" on all these fragmentary watchdogs, Arends suggests, too many would know all the secrets. Well, one carefully chosen joint committee certainly would be more likely to hold its tongues than a half dozen scattered around the Capitol.

Indeed, it boils down to the issue stated by another responsible member of Congress, Sen. Eugene McCarthy, a Minnesota Democrat, who says that only with a specialized joint committee can Congress live up to its own obligations in this field. The more secret an agency's operations, the more need for competent, outside checks.